Girls, Guys and Games: How News Media Perpetuate Stereotypes of Male and Female Gamers

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Abstract

Despite the sheer popularity of gaming, stereotypes of gamers are persistent and often ill-informed. The average age of an Australian gamer, for example, is 33 and nearly half of gamers are female. Yet, few mainstream and gaming news articles seem to acknowledge this diversity. Because news media and public perception are intertwined, such misrepresentation may affect the way gamers are perceived by the public and, in turn, how gamers negotiate their identities.

This paper, through a primarily qualitative analysis of 75 online news articles, explores many examples of simplistic and distorted portrayals of gamers that characterise news coverage. In particular, it examines three gendered tropes—'not real' female gamers, women as the victims and oppressors of gamers, and toxic male gamers—that news media use to frame the narratives that misrepresent gaming in social life.

Ultimately, this article argues that two prevailing themes underlie many news stories about gaming: the perpetuation of male technocratic privilege and moral panic. Both of these phenomena have relevance to the #GamerGate controversy of 2014, which news media portrayed as a 'culture war' between these inaccurate notions of male and female gamers. Thus, this indicates that the media blame game and alienation of gaming culture, as a multibillion-dollar international industry of increasing social importance, must be acknowledged and addressed.

Keywords

gender; news representation; tropes; stereotypes

Introduction

News, as "the first draft of history" (Wahl-Jorgensen & Hanitzsch, 2009, p. 3), has serious ramifications for public policy and perception. Yet, news media have historically shown "an almost instinctive skepticism" (Egenfeldt-Nielson, Smith & Tosca, 2016, p. 158) toward new technology and media. Music, film, radio, television and even the telephone have all been victims of the "media blame game" (Calvert, 2001, p. 129), where negative lifestyle changes are attributed to new technology.

Videogames, often incorrectly framed as the province of straight white adolescent boys, have similarly been blamed for fostering aggression, social isolation and obesity (McKernan, 2013; Narine & Grimes, 2009, p. 333; Williams, 2003). These attitudes toward gaming have arguably persisted since the 1970s (DeMaria, 2007, p. 31; Williams, 2003). They manifest throughout news coverage, but are particularly evident in the depiction of stakeholders; that is, news media often draw on narrow images of gamers[1] to convey a certain view of gaming more broadly.

Such narrow images are absurd when considering the sheer scale of the multibillion-dollar gaming industry. It is estimated that 68% of Australians, 59% of Americans and 69% of Britons play videogames (Brand & Todhunter, 2015, p. 5; Entertainment Software Association, 2014; Internet Advertising Bureau UK, 2014). Yet, stereotypes of gamers are persistent and often ill-informed. The average age of an Australian gamer, for example, is 33 and nearly half are female (Brand & Todhunter, 2015, p. 5). But such diversity—of gender and age, but also sexuality and race—is generally ignored in mainstream and gaming news.

While this misrepresentation may seem innocuous, scholars have demonstrated that mass media and public perception are "inexorably linked" (Altheide, 1997, p. 648). Because news, to some extent, "shapes the way we see the world, ourselves and each other" (Wahl-Jorgensen & Hanitzsch, 2009, p. 3), the use of unfounded stereotypes can potentially shape gamer identities and act as self-fulfilling prophecies (Snyder, Tanke & Berscheid, 1977). Dutton, Consalvo and Harper (2011), for example, argued "[j]ust as some fans work to dispel stereotypes of the typical game player, others play right into such images" (p. 303). It is, thus, crucial that we understand how news media stereotype gamers.

This paper explores the way certain gendered images of gamers are perpetuated across gaming and mainstream media. As part of a broader study into gaming representation, it draws on the question:

- How do journalists—using character tropes and sourcing practices—frame the way we think and talk about videogames?

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[1] In this paper, the term 'gamer' is synonymous with the more ubiquitous term 'player'. This is because the identified tropes are, I argue, used superficially in the news to represent both groups.

This research is not an attempt at demography. The question concerns *how* gamers are framed. To this end, this paper focuses on three gendered tropes: 'not real' female gamers, women as the victims and oppressors of gamers, and toxic male gamers. To position the tropes, this paper will first outline the theoretical framework, and introduce tropes as one specific framing device. In that context, it will then review the history of gaming news coverage and academic literature. A discussion of the news analysis will follow, before detailing the three tropes. Ultimately, it will show *how* journalists use tropes to frame the narratives—those of male technocratic privilege and moral panic—that misrepresent gaming.

Theoretical Framework: Framing, Sources and Tropes

News framing

News framing, as a branch of the broader framing paradigm, originated during the sociological turn of journalism studies in the 1980s (Pan & Kosicki, 1993, p. 56; Wahl-Jorgensen & Hanitzsch, 2009, p. 6). Gitlin (1980) adapted Goffman's (1974) notion of framing to news practices, where the abstract process of framing organises the social world for both journalists and news consumers. As a popular and abstract theory, however, there is little consensus on the terminology or ways of using this concept (D'Angelo & Kuypers, 2010, p. 2; Entman, Matthes & Pellicano, 2009, p. 175; Kitzinger, 2007, p. 135).

With such inconsistency, identifying frames is difficult and subjective. This is a common criticism of framing studies, as researchers tend to say a frame "emerged from the analysis" (Hanson, cited in Matthes & Kohring, 2008, p. 259). Placing operational constraints on frames can be useful, but also counterproductive when frames may be formed in the presence or absence of keywords, phrases, images, sources, quotations or metaphors and, more broadly, by structures that are syntactic, scripted, thematic or rhetorical (de Vreese, 2012, p. 367; Entman, 1993, p. 52; Pan & Kosicki, 1993). There is, thus, no one way to study framing.

This paper considers framing to be a process of selectively choosing information to include, emphasise and exclude. Rather than subjectively extracting frames from texts, this paper introduces tropes as one specific framing device that can be identified through sourcing analysis and substantiated through several forms of qualitative analysis.

Sourcing Practices and Newsroom Routines

The inclusion, emphasis and exclusion of information in a news report draws on countless journalistic practices and processes; deadlines, for example, limit what can be achieved. Source selection is potentially the most powerful of these factors, as news is "not what journalists think, but what their sources say" (Sigal, cited in Berkowitz, 2009, p. 103). In selecting certain sources, journalists can "ascribe normative discourses" (Capuzza, 2014, p. 116). This normative effect is especially relevant to

the gendered tropes in this paper, as selective sourcing perpetuates narrow ideas of male and female gamers.

Sources are, I argue, selected to perpetuate familiar narratives that align with news values, perceptions of the audience and socio-cultural factors (de Vreese, 2012, pp. 368–369; Shoemaker & Reese, 1996, p. 57). But, this is an often unconscious process that tends to maintain the status quo (Carpenter, 2007, p. 764; Williams, 2003, pp. 544–545). These familiar narratives can be conceived as character tropes.

Tropes in Popular Culture

While sourcing analysis is common in news framing studies, tropes are not. Instead, a trope is widely understood as "a common or overused theme or device" (*Trope*, 2016a; see also *Trope*, 2016b). Tropes can also be described as "a convenient narrative that comforts the reader by conforming to widely-held beliefs" (Yee, 2014, para. 5). This has obvious relevance to news framing, where stories are framed to appeal to audiences' existing perceptions. The term is often interchangeable with cliché or stereotype, although this paper distinguishes tropes as familiar character notions that construct a broader narrative.

It is in this sense that Anita Sarkeesian (2016) uses the term for her critique of gaming content. In the 'Tropes vs Women in Video Games' series, Sarkeesian analyses the depiction of female characters in games by defining and then illustrating tropes through gaming footage; her tropes include 'damsel in distress', 'Ms Male character' and 'women as background decoration'. Though these tropes are contested, some have parallels to the news tropes discussed later in this paper. As a result, this paper utilises a similar understanding of tropes, where their use is interrogative, challenging, political and potentially feminist. While I did not intend to study gendered tropes, the analysis overwhelmingly displayed recurring themes in the news coverage around gender.

News Coverage of Gaming

News coverage of videogames has a tumultuous history. Despite originating in the 1970s as an adult activity, videogames have long been framed in mass media as the domain of children, teenagers and youth culture in general (Williams, 2003, p. 534). This framing is not unusual for a new media form. Williams (2003) noted in his study of videogame news that all new media experience periods of news vilification; gaming was simply a "convenient target" (p. 544) in the 1970s and 1980s.

Despite the exorbitant growth of gaming since then, the misconceptions persist. Typically, these fallacies fall into one of two categories:

> At best, the term *videogame* inspires thoughts of triviality and childish obsessions. At worst, videogames are attacked in politics and billed in the media as violent, antisocial, corrupting, and dangerous to our youth. (DeMaria, 2007, p. 1)

Gaming industry advocates are usually defensive about these depictions of gaming, criticising the "sensationalistic" (DeMaria, 2007, p. 8) stories that tend "to focus almost entirely on certain high-profile games" (DeMaria, 2007, p. 7). News has also "drawn incorrectly on research" (Williams, 2003, p. 544) to link gaming and violence, often neglecting positive studies. Such reports were common in the 1990s and early 2000s, fuelled by American mass shootings, but this does not indicate a journalistic conspiracy. Because "[s]ound bites do not lend themselves to subtle distinctions" (DeMaria, 2007, p. 8), this paper emphasises the news practices that underpin misconceptions about gamers.

These misconceptions were abundant in the #GamerGate controversy of 2014, making this research more important now than ever before. Though #GamerGate was not a homogenous movement, it can be described as a supposed inquest into gaming journalism ethics that became irrevocably intertwined with the harassment of female gamers. It was largely framed in the news as a 'culture war' between stereotypical images of male and female gamers, but this served to only further alienate the gaming community (Condis, 2015; Todd, 2015, p. 64). But even so, the videogame news coverage of today is arguably more positive than the "universally negative and fearful" (DeMaria, 2007, p. 5; see also Williams, 2003) coverage of a decade or two ago.

Videogame Scholarship

Despite the financial and cultural impact of videogames, there is little research into the way people understand, talk about and depict gaming. Williams (2003) previously said gaming "remains largely ignored by communication studies scholars" (p. 523). In the 13 years since, few studies have extended beyond the game or player as the unit of analysis. When they have, such as in Ivory's (2006) study of female representation in gaming reviews, the textual analysis typically serves to represent the game or players, rather than acting as a standalone unit.

Six key studies have challenged this preoccupation with gaming content by instead examining how gaming is represented in media texts. Narine and Grimes (2009) studied the discourses of "moral panic" (p. 321) that underlay depictions of child gaming in US films and advertisements; this has relevance to the toxic male gamer trope discussed later. Likewise, McKernan (2013) explored the framing of videogames in *The New York Times* as relating to children and entertainment. Other scholars have targeted the specialist gaming press for its framing of particular issues (Cote, 2015; Kirkpatrick, 2012), but the aims of this paper most closely align with Fisher's (2012, 2015) work. As this paper's tropes confirm, Fisher (2012) argued the gaming press was "misrepresenting the full breadth of modern videogame players" (p. iii). His study drew on concepts of framing, journalistic routines and types of masculinity, all of which underpin this paper. Like others, he also noted that reality and representation are "mutually constitutive" (Cote, 2015, p. 1).

Nevertheless, Williams' (2003) study of the evolution of gaming news depictions is the most relevant. He searched all issues of three leading US news magazines between 1970 and 2000, and analysed articles about gaming within the broader social context. For Williams, the news representations acted as a "lightning rod" (p. 543) for the socio-political climate. He found a pattern of vilification, but also partial redemption. Importantly, Williams concluded that "[w]ith games no longer framed in the media as the province of white adolescent boys, we should expect to see more diversity among new players" (p. 545). McKernan (2013) reiterated such claims, but his analysis did not examine gender or race. Yet, this paper demonstrates that, although diversity has increased in reality, the news still narrowly frames gaming as male-dominated.

Method: Analysing the News

Sample Description

In line with this study's primarily qualitative nature, 75 news articles from gaming, left- and right-leaning media were selected purposively to elicit the richest and most relevant data (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 34; Patton, 2005, pp. 1635–1636). It was decided 75 articles would be sufficient to reveal patterns of portrayal, especially when spread across five controversial but common themes in gaming literature and news. This allowed 15 articles per theme and thus five instances of gaming, left- and right-leaning media per theme. The themes were:

- Addiction and death of gamers
- Banning, censorship and removing games from sale
- #GamerGate and sexism in gaming culture
- R18+ videogame rating
- Videogames and violence

During an initial search of the homepages of key gaming news outlets, these themes—among many others—were identified as common categories of news stories about gaming. To make the study more manageable, the themes were limited to only the five most salient topics examined in gaming literature (e.g. Berger, 2005; DeMaria, 2007; Egenfeldt-Nielson et al., 2016). Preliminary research also showed that less polarising themes, like the release of new games, were less widely reported in mainstream media and too formulaic for sourcing analysis. This approach to sampling was designed to avoid predetermining the news outlets, so the material is that which Australians can access online.

Overall, the articles provided a picture of gaming news across Australia, the US and UK from 2009 to 2015. The R18+ rating theme, however, specifically targeted Australian news at the height of the debate for comparison. The outlets represented different platforms—online only, broadcast, newspaper and magazine. This meant the sample (see Appendix One for a full list) reflected a variety of news situations.

Data Collection

To reflect changing news consumption practices, this study accessed the sample primarily through Google's search engine (American Press Institute, 2014; Newman & Levy, 2014). Search terms were based on the five themes in a way that attempted to reflect how people search for news; for example, search terms for the violence theme included "gaming violence news" and "videogames violence articles". This was repeated with keyword variations until reaching the desired sample size.

To ensure the reliability of Google's algorithms and access the articles with the widest possible audience, the first three pages of search results were captured and confirmed with other search engines (including Bing and Yahoo!); this was repeated six times over June/July 2015 at different times of the day. Search results were ranked according to the order in which they appeared and the top 15 articles per theme were selected across gaming, left- and right-leaning media, so as to include only the most accessible or popular articles in the analysis.

Data Analysis

Due to the complexity of sourcing practices and tropes, this primarily qualitative study went beyond the standard quantitative content analysis to include several levels of analysis; these levels can be (variably) described as thematic, discourse, sourcing and narrative analyses. In combining these types of analysis, the articles were read six times to achieve the steps of skimming, thorough reading and interpretation (e.g. Altheide, 2000; Bowen, 2009, p. 32; Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). The first three readings involved becoming familiar with the data and taking general notes about the length, format and main messages. The later three readings involved specific, albeit largely inductive, coding.

On the fourth reading, the sources were quantified based on their age, gender, race and roles as gamers, gamer relatives, academic experts and politicians. This quantification provided only "a crude overall picture of the material" (Bowen, 2009, p. 32; see also White & Marsh, 2006, p. 36). The next reading used Williams' (2003, p. 550) 29 coding variables about uses and views of gaming; this was not quantitative, but delved deeper for source details and quotes. I then, based on patterns from the two coding exercises, developed eight tropes and coded the sample again for examples that proved or disproved the character tropes. This paper focuses on gendered tropes, as those were the most salient.[2]

The Tropes

In line with Williams' (2003) conclusions, the analysis found journalists heavily drew on gender and age as the basis for tropes about gamer

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[2] The other tropes include impressionable child gamers (discussed in this article in relation to male gamers) and several that position non-gamers as ill-informed—including gamers' relatives, politicians and news media.

identities. Race was not a significant factor; though the articles were generally Anglo-normative, the sample demonstrated racial diversity akin to typical news (Heider, 2000, pp. 1–2). Sexuality, however, was not examined, as sources' orientation could not be determined. Thus, the following sections outline three gendered tropes that misrepresent gamers: women as 'not real' gamers; women as both victims and oppressors of male gamers; and male gamers as toxic and dysfunctional.

These tropes are not without merit; women can be casual gamers, just as male gamers can be dysfunctional. The significance in identifying these tropes is that, based on participation statistics, these character notions do not represent the diversity of gamers and, further, their perpetuation demonstrates blatant, albeit not necessarily intentional, misrepresentation. It is not problematic for one story to depict a specific female gamer playing a casual game like *Peggle*. But when this is the norm, it serves to marginalise, vilify and potentially affect gamers in negotiating their identities (Snyder et al., 1977; Williams, 2003, p. 546).

'Not Real' Female Gamers

Women are scarcely associated with gaming, even though they constitute 47% of Australian, 48% of American and 52% of British gamers (Brand & Todhunter, 2015, p. 5; Entertainment Software Association, 2014; Internet Advertising Bureau UK, 2014). This section outlines the 'not real' female gamer trope, where gaming, or at least 'serious' gaming, is framed in the news as an activity not for women. 'Not real' describes the accusation levelled at the female gamer; she is considered inauthentic when compared to her male counterparts.

In the sampled texts, this perceived lack of authenticity often manifested as an underlying assumption of the male gamer (Williams, 2003, p. 531). There were also examples where the credibility of female gamers was questioned, such as when they were depicted as casual players seeking male attention. Evidently, marginalising women in news coverage in these ways upholds the perception that gaming is for men.

Female gamers as marginalised

Female gamers were a minority in the news sample. This was somewhat expected, as "studies that explored gender diversity of sources have consistently found concentrations of males" (Freedman & Fico, 2005, p. 259) in the news. Nevertheless, female gamers were marginalised beyond the common ratio of three male to one female source (Freedman & Fico, 2005, p. 260). In this study, women were associated with a gaming role in 25 of 75 articles. When removing the 15 articles about sexism, however, only 10 of the other 60 articles in the sample indicated that women were gamers at all. Of those articles, only four actually quoted female gamers. Male gamers were, conversely, quite common in news coverage; they were identified in 45 of the 75 articles. The remaining 30 articles were policy-based, with little input from gamers.

As consistent with Williams' (2003, p. 533) findings about the invisible norm of the male gamer, no articles quoted female gamers without also referencing men. The proportion of male gamers per article was also significantly higher. There were 50 named female and 99 named male gamers in the sample. When accounting for articles about sexism, the ratio dropped dramatically to five female and 77 male gamers across 60 articles. Male gamers were, thus, interviewed and discussed 15.4 times more often than female gamers about subjects other than sexism.

Although this study is not statistically representative, this male gamer norm was also perpetuated in accompanying pictures and video footage. For example, in *SBS News'* ironically titled "Gaming stereotypes begin to change" story, all sources were men and, importantly, filler footage showed only male gamers (Medhora, 2013). It was evident that news media overwhelmingly framed gaming as a male activity.

Female gamers as casual players

When female gamers were referenced outside of stories about sexism, it was implied they were typically casual players. This draws on assumed traits of masculinity and femininity, which are associated with hardcore or casual gaming (Fisher, 2015; Juul, 2010, p. 72; Walkerdine, 2006, p. 521). First-person shooter games, for example, are deemed masculine (Royse et al., 2007, p. 560). Specific references to 'female' games included *Peggle*, *Candy Crush*, *Temple Run*, *Barbie Horse Adventures* and *Imagine Babiez*—all of which are silly, dismissible and colourful. In contrast, male gamers were associated with more thematically mature and literally darker games, like *Halo*, *Call of Duty*, *Grand Theft Auto*, *World of Warcraft* and *Manhunt*. This is consistent with Williams (2003, pp. 531–532) and DeMaria's (2007, p. 7) observations about socially gendered games, but the gendering of these games is complex.

To some extent, the division between female casual players and male hardcore gamers is accurate. A *BBC News* story explained "60% of popular smartphone game *Temple Run*'s players are female (although that game does allow one to play as a female character)" (Gittleson, 2014, para. 22). Thus, play preferences may affect the perception, but the reality itself is shaped by the game's social implications. Williams (cited in Gittleson, 2014), for example, asked "[a]re women not playing hardcore games because they don't like them? Or because they feel alienated?" (para. 30). News media, by misrepresenting female gamers as mostly casual players, only further discourage women from identifying as gamers and participating in gaming communities.

Female gamers as "attention whores"

This casual norm is only compounded by the female "attention whore" (Nunneley, 2012, para. 12) mentioned in a *VG247* article about online harassment. Interestingly, the study cited by Nunneley (2012) revealed that "an individual using femaleness to attain special favours and gifts … is more likely to be a self-identified male posing as a woman" (para. 13).

Thus, the female attention whore has little basis in gaming. This is, however, an enduring notion that "continues a long, misogynistic tradition" (Nova, cited in Gray, 2013, para. 4) beyond gaming culture.

The accusation that women exploit male attention was common in the #GamerGate news, as game developer Zoe Quinn became associated with allegations of sexual misconduct. When describing a fictional game developer in the #GamerGate-inspired *Law & Order: SVU* episode, one story quoted a character as saying "'a lot of gamers think she slept her way into the business,' a not-so-veiled reference to the spurious genesis of the GamerGate hashtag" (Machkovech, 2015, para. 4). Though critical of the dialogue, *Ars Technica* correlated the fictional Punjabi and the real Quinn with sex. It was not, however, generalised to all women.

The Daily Mail, by contrast, cited a study which broadly found women consider themselves more attractive to men if they play videogames (Woollaston, 2015). The story only briefly mentioned male gamers, yet explicitly repeated in five paragraphs that women play games to appeal to men. Further, the whole second half of the report explored the causes for this and, although the researchers were not quoted as saying such, related the finding to evolution. Evidently, female gamers were framed as seeking male attention, even when this conflicted with the evidence.

Women as Victim and Oppressor

Despite the oddness of the duality, the sampled news texts repeatedly characterised women as being abused by the traditional male gamer and male-dominated gaming industry, while also somehow threatening, questioning or disrupting the male gamer and industry. Williams (2003) noted a similar theme in a 1982 article, which, in a "decidedly unsubtle tone", said "[w]omen, especially if they are wives, generally resent the games, and quite often regard them with outright loathing" (p. 532). While the analysis for this paper showed this archaic characterisation is now rare, women were still portrayed as an enemy of male gamers.

This manifested in the sample as an extension of "the feminist killjoy" (Braithwaite, 2014) and as women not understanding their male partner's gaming interests. By dividing the genders in this way, where women are deemed antagonistic to the male-dominated space, women are further disassociated from gaming. This reinforces the male norm.

Men versus women in #GamerGate

#GamerGate stories were rife with this 'men versus women' attitude. This reflected their #GamerGate nature, but, according to Hern (2014), news media enabled the gender division by referring to #GamerGate in headlines like "[t]he death of the 'gamers' and the women who 'killed' them" (Ernst & May, 2014, para. 23). *Bloomberg Businessweek* similarly depicted Anita Sarkeesian as "[t]he gaming industry's greatest adversary" (Kolhatkar, 2014) in an empathetic feature, where her harassers were quoted at length and given prominence. Thus, the

impression was that Sarkeesian was victimised, but also encouraging such behaviour. Male gamer Joel Bernabel (cited in Ernst & May, 2014) said the "death threats [feed Sarkeesian's] popularity even more, because she goes to the media and she's like, 'I'm the victim'" (para. 29). This demonstrates that, although women may be construed as a victim in the news, they are also questioned for playing the victim.

This was also common when describing the general controversy of #GamerGate. Though it was characterised as "men going after women" (Sarkeesian, cited in Video game world erupts, 2014, para. 8), the same *Sky News* report gave credence to the argument that "hardcore gamers"—conflated with male gamers—were being "bullied for enjoying a pastime" (para. 9). In these examples, the women were depicted as the male gamers' enemy for "challenging the status quo of gaming as a male-dominated space" (Sarkeesian, cited in Video game world, 2014, para. 14). This reflects the feminist killjoy, where "feminists and feminism are treated as threats to these virtual spaces" (Braithwaite, 2014, p.703). Though Braithwaite considers this a trope in itself, this paper extends the feminist killjoy notion to encompass other news depictions that drew on the 'men versus women' attitude.

Men versus women outside of #GamerGate

Examples of this attitude outside of #GamerGate included the recurring motif of the wife or girlfriend who disapproves of her gaming man's addiction. While the stories empathised with the women whose partners were distant, they also portrayed these women as failing to understand their partner's manly gaming interest. Victoria van Cleave (cited in Lush, 2011) was "disgusted" by her husband, because she "couldn't believe that someone could choose a virtual family over a real one" (para. 7). Yet, Victoria was also framed as a source of her husband's frustration.

Even more so, the female partners of gaming addicts were shown to contribute to the addiction. In a *Kotaku* story, the girlfriend broke up with the addict, only to drive him deeper into the throes of depression and gaming addiction. Addict Fahey (2009) explained how he hurt his girlfriend, while expressing blame at her for laying naked in his bed:

> I was so close to level 40 I could taste it … I still remember the urgency I felt, along with the annoyance that this woman was trying to keep me from reaching my goal. Couldn't she understand how important this was to me? (para. 29)

This quote highlights the autobiographical nature of the feature, which helped to frame the story; Fahey acted as a toxic male source, but as the journalist also constructed the narrative to align with his view. In this example, his girlfriend was victimised because of his pathology, but also at fault. Evidently, this trope extends beyond the feminist killjoy to broadly characterise women as an enemy or adversary of male gamers.

Toxic Male Gamers

The classic image of the gamer—an adolescent boy who spends too much time indoors—is pervasive. He is socially awkward and isolated, yet prone to aggression, sexism and generally antisocial behaviour. This channels toxic masculinity, which has been a popular concept in the gaming press since #GamerGate (e.g. O'Malley, 2015; Hollingworth & Irving, 2015). It draws on hegemonic and geek masculinities (e.g. Dutton et al., 2011), but this paper uses 'toxic' to convey the negativity.

Despite claims that "[t]he image of the typical gamer as a lone teenage boy in his room is gone" (Qvist, 2014, para. 1) and "[t]he myth that the videogamer is a 14-year-old in his mother's basement is really no longer applicable" (Golding, cited in Medhora, 2013), the trope of the toxic male gamer remains. While male gamers were dominant in the sample overall, 43 articles associated men with problematic behaviours. Only two articles, by contrast, showed problematic female gamers. Though this is consistent with the male norm, toxic male gamers—in terms of violence, addiction and sexism—were a disproportionate majority.

Male gamers as violent

The moral panic is strongest when male-perpetrated violence is linked to gaming as a relatively expected act. In the sample, 12 murderers were identified as gamers, including mass shooters Evan Ramsey, Dylan Klebold, Eric Harris, Anders Breivik, Adam Lanza and Aaron Alexis. Other articles implied that certain abuse or criminal activity was performed by male gamers. This is despite the tenuous link between games and some of these men. Within the sample, *GameSpot* offered this perspective:

> Finding that a young man who committed a violent crime also played a popular videogame ... is as pointless as pointing out that the criminal also wore socks. (Markey, cited in Makuch, 2014, para. 6)

This is why this trope is so important. News stories on violence rarely, if ever, identify that a perpetrator wore socks; identifying a murderer as a gamer frames gaming as suspicious, dangerous or otherwise toxic.

But, the blame is not always explicit; other sources made more general links between games, men and violence. In one story, violent games were said to be "grooming yet another generation of boys to tolerate violence against women" ('Sexually violent' GTA 5, 2014, para. 8). This recurring connection between violence, as extreme toxicity, and male gamers often filters into more routine accounts of antisocial behaviour.

Male gamers as addicts

Like with the violent male gamer, men were overwhelmingly depicted as gaming addicts. This was particularly evident in stories about addiction, but persisted across the 75 articles. Gaming was implicated in the non-fatal addiction of 14 and the deaths of 15 male gamers. Race was most

prominent with this pathological gamer, with most of those who died identified as Asian. Yet, living addicts like Mike Fahey were mostly white.

Fahey's (2009) story was typical for gamers identified as addicts, but some stories generalised his addict behaviour to (male) gamers; he lost his job and became "a gaunt, unshaven, unshowered recluse... withdrawn from the outside world" (para. 37). This was consistent with other stories; Ryan van Cleave and Brett also contemplated suicide, while Jack Perry stole money and "would pee into a sliced open water bottle" (Woods, 2015, para. 11; see also D'Anastasio, 2015; Lush, 2011). These are men with actual addictions and, thus, the problem is not that news discusses addiction, but that it fails to distinguish addiction from appropriate play.

Non-gamer sources often blurred these lines. An addict's girlfriend, for example, "just figured I was dating a gamer ... my older brother was the same way. He worked, came home, and played videogames" (Fahey, 2009, para. 31). An *ABC News* report similarly failed to specify whether its sources were addicts. Dan Buckmaster seemed like a typical 23-year-old gamer, but other people think he is "a bit dodgy" (Barrett, 2014, para. 32) because he "plays first-person shooter games for hours at a time" (para. 27). While these examples of unshaven, unemployed and 'dodgy' male gamers are less concerning than murderous male gamers, both reveal a propensity to treat male gamers with suspicion.

Male gamers as sexist or self-entitled

Male gamers were also depicted as sexist in several news articles, which was seen as an extension of the socially isolated gamer. Two male gamers in the sample—Aris Bakhtanians and Josh Mattingly—harassed women, while some articles quoted sexist abuse from anonymous men at length, generally as voiceovers (Fletcher, 2012, para. 3–6; Schafter, 2014). This was common of #GamerGate stories, but even though some women identify with #GamerGate, no female voices were used.

Such harassment was defended by seven identified male gamers in the reports. Bakhtanians (cited in Fletcher, 2012) explained that "sexual harassment is part of the culture" (para. 19), while Jonathan Quamina, "an avid gamer" (Fletcher, 2012, para. 28), defended Bakhtanians:

> As a female you can't get upset if something is said that is obscene if you're hanging out in a room full of guys ... It's like going to a strip club as a female and getting upset that the chicks are all naked. For me it goes back to freedom of speech. (para. 29–30)

In this quote, Quamina marginalised female gamers and defended the abuse by, as a source, framing gaming as a male activity. This freedom of speech thread is constantly woven into news articles by (male) gamers. They defended "the right to buy games despite their content" (Herbert, cited in 'Sexually violent' GTA 5, 2014, para. 10) and feared "censorship" (Ernst & May, 2014; Jønler, 2015). Many of these stories attributed such attitudes to "hardcore" (Video game world erupts, 2014)

or "core" (Stuart, 2014) gamers and, as such, the selection of these antagonistic male gamers as sources is a journalistic choice.

Discussion of Key Findings

This project aimed to determine how journalists framed gaming news and, specifically, the limited ways in which male and female gamers were represented. I found eight key tropes that shaped such coverage, but this paper identified the gender discrepancy in news representations through a discussion of just three gendered tropes. Two themes—male technocratic privilege and moral panic—emerged from these tropes.

Male Technocratic Privilege

In the news sample, female gaming voices were often marginalised and discredited through the perpetuation of the two female tropes: 'not real' female gamers, and women as the victims and oppressors of male gamers. By dramatically under-representing female gamers as news sources, the invisible norm of the male gamer prevailed (Williams, 2003, p. 531). Likewise, depicting women as casual players seeking male attention, while presenting them as adversaries of male gamers, worked to delegitimise them. Though Fisher (2015) did not identify tropes, he did observe similar patterns of representation in his study of gaming media. Ultimately, he suggested this minimisation of female voices in news discourse constructs men as the "real gamers" (p. 557).

This idea of men as "real gamers" arguably maintains male technocratic privilege. Johnson (2014) labelled this "technomasculinity", which is the "ideological perspective that naturally associates men with highly skilled technological work" (p. 581). Williams (2003) explained how the media framing of female gamers operates within this power struggle:

> If women were stereotyped as being uninterested or unable to grasp technology, men would retain power in that sphere. This is not to suggest that there was some sort of conspiracy to keep women in place. Rather, it is evident that the pursuit of science and technology continues to be socially constructed as male. (p. 545)

In turn, this gender division creates tension for women in building their gamer identity. According to some female gamers in the sample, women are (marginally) less likely to play hardcore games because: casual games are more often gender-neutral in design, so are less alienating; and female gamers are harassed out of the space. Scholars Spender (1997) and Johnson (2014) confirmed the latter, where systemic "badgering and bullying" (Spender, 1997, p. 146) excludes women from the male-dominated gaming and technological spheres. Brianna Wu (cited in Qvist, 2014) agreed, saying "the culture pushes [women] away at every point" (para. 17). This manifested in the #GamerGate harassment, but Hern (2014) argued it was then reflected and enabled by news media. In discouraging and disassociating women from gaming

in these ways, both gaming and mainstream media normalise these gender discourses and perpetuate the tropes about female gamers.

At the same time, female gamers seem to be aware of this perception that they do not belong. Various scholars have shown that negative stereotypes about female gamers can affect their performance (e.g. Kaye & Pennington, 2016) or cause female gamers to modify their behaviour to avoid harassment (e.g. Fox & Tang, 2014, p. 318). In the sampled articles, female gamers were cautious not to generalise about harassment or cause controversy. Edidin (2014) highlighted "that girl":

> "That girl" is the bogeyman, a cautionary tale to keep the ladies in line. "That girl" is the woman who is iced out for speaking up and ruining everyone's fun. I hear about her from almost every woman I interview. (para. 16)

While this applies to women who are active gamers, it also suggests that some women are discouraged entirely from gaming as a result of male dominance. Other women may distance themselves from the culture, so they play games but do not identify as gamers (Shaw, 2012). Overall, Cote (2015) best summarises the impact news media can have in discouraging women from gaming, saying "[g]iven the mutually constitutive nature of representation and reality, the lack of women in consumer press then affected girls' ability to identify as gamers and enter the gaming community" (p. 1). This is a self-referential cycle, where the perception only further replicates and reinforces the reality.

This is not to suggest that news media perpetuate male technocratic privilege intentionally. Instead, the tropes appear to manifest out of balance, journalistic routine and perceptions of the audience. Quoting a female gamer often goes against existing norms, so it is easier to frame a story about gaming using male gamers. Even in harassment stories in the sample, journalists consulted multiple sources to avoid appearing one-sided in favour of the female victims; but by drawing on the tropes, they selected the embodiment of the toxic male gamer. This happened regardless of political alignment; even socially progressive outlets would contrast the victimised women with the opinions of toxic male gamers. This is the "lazy coverage" that Hern (2014) said enabled #GamerGate. Nevertheless, this returns to sourcing practices and highlights conflict as a journalistic news value (Gillman, 2011, pp. 248–249; Lamble, 2011, p. 39). It also demonstrates that male gamers are misrepresented as well.

Moral Panic

The second theme of moral panic, where gaming is blamed for society's problems, related to the trope of toxic male gamers. It was revealed that male gamers were, unlike their female counterparts, associated with toxic behaviours. This was most evident when male-perpetrated violence was attributed to gaming, but this also filtered into more routine accounts of addicted male gamers with sexist or self-entitled attitudes.

Such a narrow depiction of male gamers (who were positioned as "real gamers") treats gaming with suspicion, instigating moral panic and erroneously differentiating gaming culture from society.

This fear of toxic male gamers filters into a fear that children will inadvertently become sexist, addicted and antisocial killers through the influence of videogames. Williams (2003) found this concern for children was limited to young boys, where "the violent-by-nature boys were framed as especially susceptible to the negative media effects that plague society" (p. 532; see also Walkerdine, 2006). This notion of susceptibility and vulnerability taps into the broader moral panic about children's leisure time (Narine & Grimes, 2009, p. 321). When likening fears about gaming to that of *Dungeons and Dragons*, Ferguson (2008) explained the fear stems from "the oft-repeated but somewhat apocryphal view that 'kids can't tell fiction from reality'" (p. 30).

This archaic notion that 'kids can't tell fiction from reality' was common in the sample, when young (male) gamers were violent or addicted. A *Vice* article, for example, said of a teenage boy:

> Brett was playing so many hours of video games the seams between reality and virtual reality started to break down, once causing him to attempt a *World of Warcraft*-style teleportation move at a bus stop. (D'Anastasio, 2015, para. 6)

This seems ludicrous and, because of its sheer oddness, out of the norm. Yet, the sampled articles identified various cases where those boundaries broke down for young boys absorbed by gaming. Mass shooter Evan Ramsey said, because of his obsession with *Doom*, he did not understand that shooting someone would necessarily be fatal (Usher, 2013, para. 4–5). Other articles quoted parents or politicians who made comparable comments about fiction and reality. Ultimately, this underpinned all 12 accounts of young boys acting in toxic ways.

But this moral panic about young gamers is only relevant when games are framed as suspicious or, in some articles, as the counterpoint of what is deemed good. US Senator Leland Yee, for example, referred to his attempts at legislating against violent games as "the good fight" (cited in Orland, 2015, para. 7). Similarly, Australian Christian Lobby spokesman Jim Wallace said classifications must "protect the common good" (cited in Medhora, 2013), while New Zealand Chief Censor Bill Hastings posited that *Manhunt* was "injurious to the public good" (cited in Rayfield, 2013, para. 20). In these cases, videogames were framed as the opposite of 'good' and children were put forward as the primary motivation behind doing what is 'good'. This invokes a sense of moral panic about the toxic male gamer, who these (male) children could, potentially, become. Such panic may then guide fearful parents to restrict access to games or otherwise inhibit young people from assuming a gamer identity.

News media prompt this panic through framing choices. Sourcing a Christian group, for example, makes a moral judgement about games. Likewise, sourcing toxic men to perform the role of gamer normalises this behaviour and taps into the moral panic zeitgeist that marks the media blame game. Though this serves a different purpose than marginalising female gamers, it also maintains the status quo—this time, regarding distinctions between real and online, mainstream and other.

Limitations and Future Research

There are several main limitations to this work. First, it must be noted that this study is exploratory rather than statistically representative, and not all of the data supported the tropes; some articles were clearly subversive, whereas others simply did not rely on the tired tropes. While the invisible norm of the male gamer was pervasive, women were not always depicted in a lesser position. This was especially common with articles about sexism, where 'serious' female gamers were consulted for their opinions. Yet, many of these women were sourced as harassment victims and, as such, their inclusion does not contradict the tropes.

Likewise, though male gamers were typically represented as violent, sexist or otherwise antisocial, this was not definitive; some male gamers were portrayed positively, while a small number of female gamers were represented as violent or addicted. Putting aside the limitations of the sample, the numbers were roughly equivalent when considering the news ratio of male to female gamers, but it was wildly disproportionate when the same toxic men were mentioned in different articles. Rigorous survey research, therefore, is necessary to determine the frequency and severity of these representations in the news.

This leads to the second caveat: while this paper highlights the way these tropes are used in gaming news, gaming is not a special situation. Rather, the findings have parallels to other subjects. For example, the 'not real' female gamer trope demonstrated that, like Sarkeesian's (2016) exploration of women in games, there are many examples of women being positioned in non-important roles as background decoration; this is typical of news in general (Freedman & Fico, 2005, pp. 259–260). The tropes also operated within news values. Yee (2014) suggested they act as a reference point for audiences to comprehend what may otherwise be an unfamiliar subject and, thus, tropes are derived from journalistic practices and are not necessarily unique to gaming.

Third, the international and multi-platform sample used is likely to have been unfathomably affected by cultural differences and varying newsroom practices. However, using Google to gather articles that are not restricted by location or outlet maximised the diversity of the sample so that findings can be applied to other news subjects (Patton, 2005, p. 1636). This diversity also showed that tropes transcend boundaries of culture, platform and the specialist/mainstream media divide.

Nevertheless, this study does not address the way that gamers respond to the tropes, or if they are received as conveyed. Just like in Williams' (2003) exploration of videogame frames:

> A content analysis cannot prove effects, and the presence of particular media frames is not proof of anything conscious among journalists. Nor are these frames the same thing as an accurate measure of public opinion or of individual reactions. (p. 545)

Therefore, this study analysed the tropes that exist in the news itself, through the lens of the researcher. It is also important to note that while gaming may not be male-dominated in terms of audience demographics, which makes the female tropes a misrepresentation of gamers, the perception of gaming as male-dominated is true in other respects (see Newman, 2004, p. 53). For example, various analyses of playable and non-playable characters in videogames claim women are generally ignored or sexualised (e.g. Beasley & Collins Standley, 2002; Dietz, 1998; Downs & Smith, 2010; Dunlop, 2007; Williams, Martins, Consalvo & Ivory, 2009). This is often correlated with the disproportionately small number of game developers that are female (Johnson, 2014; Williams et al., 2009, p. 830). Thus, though the tropes blatantly misrepresent gamers, future research could explore the operation of these tropes in gaming culture, or the response of gamers to this news representation.

Conclusion

News media hold great power in shaping perceptions. As a result, this paper examined how journalists in gaming and mainstream news use tropes and sourcing practices to frame the way we think and talk about videogames. Through a primarily qualitative analysis of 75 online news articles, journalistic routines and sourcing practices were found to underpin three recurring tropes that narrowly portrayed male and female gamers. Often, certain behaviours and attitudes were normalised through the selection of sources. While the tropes had some truth to them and, at times, reflected those found in games and gaming culture:

> In reality, there is no gender, age, class or race inherent in media technologies, despite the repetition of those constructions in the news media's framing. (Williams, 2003, p. 546)

Evidently, the tropes do not accurately reflect the diversity of gamers and, instead, blatantly misrepresent them. This, due to the self-fulfilling nature of stereotypes and the role of news as social mediator, affects the way in which gamers negotiate their identities (Snyder et al., 1977).

Further, this paper demonstrates how such misrepresentation can serve to maintain male technocratic privilege and instigate moral panic. This is not to say that journalists are necessarily at fault, as media discourse is a product of the realities of commercial news production. Instead, the tropes, lack of diversity and misrepresentation indicate that the media

blame game and alienation of gaming culture—even as a multibillion-dollar international industry of increasing social importance—is ongoing.

Acknowledgements

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Appendix One: Data Sample

Addiction and Death of Gamers

Gaming and technology outlets
Breeze, M. (2013, January 12). A quiet killer: Why video games are so addictive. *The Next Web*. Retrieved from http://thenextweb.com

Crossley, R. (2015, January 19). Man dies after 3-day games binge. *GameSpot*. Retrieved from http://www.gamespot.com

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Left-leaning news outlets
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Hunt, K. & Ng, N. (2015, January 19). Man dies in Taiwan after 3-day online gaming binge. *CNN*. Retrieved from http://edition.cnn.com

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Rudd, A. (2012, July 18). Diablo death: Teenager dies after playing video game for 40 hours without eating or sleeping. *The Mirror*. Retrieved from http://www.mirror.co.uk

Right-leaning news outlets
Crone, J. (2015, February 27). Video game fan, 22, burned himself to death after his father told him to stop playing computer games and go to bed in Taiwan. *The Daily Mail.* Retrieved from http://www.dailymail.co.uk

Dunn, M. (2015, January 19). Taiwanese man dies after video game binge lasting three days in Kaohsiung city. *News.com.au*. Retrieved from http://www.news.com.au

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Woods, A. (2015, January 14). Confessions of a video games addict. *The Telegraph*. Retrieved from http://www.telegraph.co.uk

Banning, Censorship and Removing Games from Sale

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[3] This article has since been removed from the *Cinema Blend* website.